OPINION

BY F.S. AIJAZUDDIN

Pyrrhic laurels

NO one probably remembers. I do. The occasion was many years ago — in the last century in fact — when the then British high commissioner Sir Nicholas Barrington invited me to speak to the Asian Study Group in Islamabad. The topic, he suggested, should be UK-Pak relations.

That evening, Sir Nicholas sat in the front row, flanked by the Russian and another ambassador. I began by saying that if there was any single event that shaped our historical ties, one would have to go back to 54 BCE, when the first Roman soldier stepped on the shores of Rome's newest colony, Britannia.

In the wake of that Roman soldier, came Roman culture, Roman civics, Rome's language (Latin), and Roman law. For centuries thereafter, it was Roman law that was taught at the Inns of Court in London. Four particular barristers from the subcontinent who benefited from this education were M.A. Jinnah, J. Nehru, M.K. Gandhi, and Z.A. Bhutto.

Over the years, the tenets of Roman law, modified by the precedents derived from English common law, became the template of our judicial system, just as the British Indian civil service provided the 'steel frame' for our own administrative structure.

Just over 50 years ago, in April 1973, President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (assisted by his law minister Abdul Hafeez Pirzada) birthed a Constitution. It had a difficult infancy. Within its first four years, it underwent seven surgeries. The latest amendment (the 27th), regarded by some specialists as fatal, has been endorsed by Bhutto's grandson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and signed into law by Bhutto's son-in-law President Asif Zardari.

It has been alleged that many of our legislators had not even read the text of the 27th Amendment before passing it. Nevertheless, their actions are legally binding. To some, that is true democracy in action. To others, it is a distortion of the late Benazir Bhutto's assertion that "Democracy is the best revenge". The 27th Amendment has been adopted in haste. Legislators have left it to their constituents to repent at leisure.

The Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi once defined democracy as a tripod of "the executive, the legislature and the judiciary". The world has forgotten the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, 1991. Aung San Suu Kyi has spent two decades in jail or under house arrest, defending the civil rights of 50 million of her compatriots. Nelson Mandela (another Nobel Peace Prize laureate, 1993) survived 27 years of incarceration.

Here, Benazir Bhutto endured nearly six years in jail or under detention, while her husband Asif Zardari was kept in prison for 11 years, before beginning his current term in the gilded cage of the presidency.

Anyone within the legal profession and outside it who has watched the gradual emasculation of the judiciary over the years cannot view the latest events with anything other than dismay. The ethical standards that distinguished justice A.R. Cornelius or justice Dorab Patel and many such principled adjudicators have evaporated into memory. Their black robes were not a symbol of detachment, of impartiality. They denoted gravitas and integrity.

Today, those robes have become a distracting camouflage. As one wit put it, "What many people forget is that judges are just lawyers in robes." They spar in public, like the noisy litigants who appear before them.

The latest amendment has forced our democracy to stand on one leg. The American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton warned against such constitutional gymnastics: "Liberty can have nothing to fear from the judiciary alone, but would have everything to fear from its union with either of the other departments."

> Judicial robes have become a distracting camouflage.

One of the key innovations in the 27th Amendment is the cloak of immunity granted to certain state functionaries. It could prove to be a pyrrhic victory, a perishable laurel. Immunity for life can never be assured, no more than Egyptian pharaohs could even over 5,000 years of effort guarantee themselves immortality.

The next general elections in Pakistan are due in May 2029. President Trump's present term will end in January 2029. Until then, no voter in Pakistan should expect a change in the status quo. Our current parliament has no intention of going anywhere, except in guided circles.

Commenting on a practice followed in the British House of Commons, the eminent British jurist Lord Denning — described by prime minister Margaret Thatcher as "probably the greatest English judge of modern times" — observed that "the House of Commons starts its proceedings with a prayer. The chaplain looks at the assembled members with their varied intelligence, and then prays for the country". Pakistani voters should follow that chaplain's example and start their day with a prayer for our hapless country. ■

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BY NAEEM SADIQ

Disarm to heal

ONE of the biggest self-inflicted tragedies of Pakistan has been its generous and mindless distribution of weapon licences. This misguided benevolence has exacerbated crime and militancy besides promoting the mushroom growth of riverine dacoits, tribal militants, religious extremists and urban mafias. In violation of Article 256 of the Constitution, Pakistan is now believed to host more than 500 private armies, many equipped with automatic weapons, mortars, rocket launchers, and anti-aircraft guns.

For over two decades, citizens' groups such as Citizens Against Weapons, have championed the cause of a peaceful and weapons-free Pakistan — a nation where people can live secure, lawful, and dignified lives, free from the menace of guns and private militias. Tragically, instead of heeding such calls for deweaponisation, successive governments chose the opposite path — actively encouraging the spread of firearms and legitimising private militias.

Nearly 70,000 prohibited-bore gun licences were issued to parliamentarians, while bans on non-prohibited bore arms were lifted and SROs issued to allow the president, prime minister, Speaker, governors, chief ministers, ministers, judges and senior bureaucrats to obtain prohibited bore arms licences. Following clashes with militant groups last month, the Punjab government announced a series of long-overdue and much-needed steps to curb the spread of firearms and associated militancy. These included an immediate ban on the issuance of new arms licences, a one-month deadline for the surrender of illegal weapons, mandatory registration of all licensed firearms and the possession of illegal arms as a non-bailable offence. While these measures are commendable, they fall short of addressing the deeper issues at the heart of Pakistan's gun culture. It is therefore proposed that the federation and the provinces jointly adopt a coherent, nationwide deweaponisation policy built on the following principles.

The possession of arms must be declared the exclusive domain of the state, and no citizen, regardless of his/ her position or status, must be allowed to possess, carry or display any weapon — licensed or otherwise. In compliance with Article 256 of the Constitution, all private armies regardless of their size or patronage, should be completely disbanded. Likewise, a complete ban on the issuance of licences for all categories of weapons must be implemented for all territories of Pakistan. A widely advertised campaign should lay down the rules for the surrender of all illegal weapons and the re-registration of all licensed weapons in government-designated offices within a four-week deadline.

In 2003, Brazil launched a nationwide gun buyback programme to curb the menace of soaring gun violence. It collected over 450,000 firearms in just six months. Australia, too, witnessed remarkable success through similar initiatives. There is no reason why Pakistan cannot adopt a similar policy. Such a scheme could be a game changer. Eliminating all quotas and special entitlements for gun licences granted to parliamentarians, ministers and government officials would greatly enhance public trust in the sincerity of the programme. Furthermore, carrying or the display of weapons, except by law-enforcement agencies, should be completely prohibited.

Numerous countries such as Japan, Australia, the UK, Vietnam, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore have taken drastic steps to eliminate weapons held by civilians. Their laws prohibit any gun licences for self-defence purposes. Pakistan, on the contrary, leveraged gun licences as an instrument of bribe and appeasement for anyone who was rich, influential or a party affiliate. Sadly, despite being among the largest victims of burgeoning violence and militancy, we failed to take any thoughtful or rational preventive steps.

> Gun licences are being issued with remarkable generosity.

As if in a contest to outdo one another, the provinces have been issuing prohibited and non-prohibited bore gun licences with remarkable generosity. Data obtained through the Right to Information laws reveals an alarming picture: a total of 117,479 prohibited-bore and 3,491,823 non-prohibited-bore licences were issued by the federal and provincial authorities. This does not include those whose data was lost, caught fire or never recorded.

The rich and the powerful are either disproportionately well protected by the state or have private armies of their own. This must end. A state weakened by its own indulgence in a 'guns for all' policy must finally decide between appeasement of a few versus 'chaos for all'. Here is yet another opportunity to deweaponise, to heal, and to build a safer, more peaceful Pakistan. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Detente for all

UNITED NATIONS: The General Assembly today [Nov 19] called for extension of the process of detente for all regions of the world with equal participation of all States in bringing about just and lasting solutions to international problems. It did so by adopting a First Committee proposal on implementing the UN declaration on the strengthening of international security by a recorded vote of 109 in favour (including Pakistan) to none against with 19 abstentions including the [US], Israel and most Western nations. The resolution reaffirmed the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples under alien domination calling for the total elimination of colonialism, racism and apartheid. … The Assembly [also] recommended disarmament measures. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from Dacca,] Bangladesh and Pakistan will set up their respective diplomatic missions in the second half of next month, the mass circulation "Ittefaq" reported… . The daily … also said Saudi Arabia may send an Ambassador to Dacca during the same period. The paper quoted informed sources as saying that there may be some delay for China to send an Ambassador… .

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

'Do not look to UN'

KOTLI: "Depend solely on your own efforts and do not look to the UN or any other international power for the liberation of your motherland," Chaudhri Ghulam Abbas, Supreme Head of Azad Kashmir Government, advised the people while addressing a huge public meeting… .

He said: "Your heroism and your fortitude have been unreservedly applauded by the whole world. I remember the words of an army authority that never after the Islamic crusades had any army fought in such complete disregard of material resources and against such overwhelming odds as the mujahids in the liberation war of Kashmir."

… Stating that the people of Kashmir not only owed it to themselves to liberate their country but the security and stability of Pakistan also imposed this duty upon them, he continued. He said: "Looking back at the small beginning of our struggle in 1931, when we used to court arrest against the Dogra high handedness your present achievement appears tremendous when you have already liberated a great part of our country. But duty demands that by the liberation of your entire country you must make your present look small before your future. God help you." — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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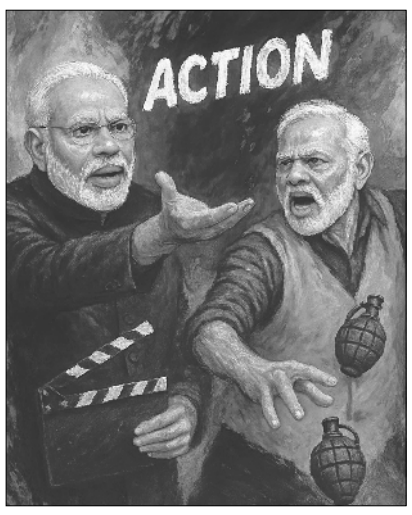
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.



Movies, truth and political ambition

IN the 1980s, Indian cinema held a unique charm that transcended boundaries and classes. Films of that era were creative and full of imagination, mirroring reality, with story and screenplay writers, lyricists and directors serving as the true masterminds behind the industry's success. It was a time when storytelling mattered, creativity was genuine, and cinema served as a bridge of culture and sentiment. But as time passed, the heart of Indian cinema began to fade. The stories lost their soul, the direction became superficial, and movies that once mirrored society's aspirations turned into tools of manipulation and propaganda.

Today, the decline of Indian films is not just a matter of art losing its essence — it is a reflection of how politics has swallowed creativity. The scriptwriter, director and producer of India's latest 'blockbusters' is none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His films are no longer about love, sacrifice or humanity; they are crafted to exploit emotions, ignite hatred, and convert tragedy into political mileage. These films usually premiere right before elections, ensuring that fear replaces reason and manipulation overshadows morality. The irony is that most of Modi's election-season films have flopped miserably, but the cost of their failure is measured not in box-office returns, but in human lives. And whenever his cinematic politics falls flat, Pakistan becomes the convenient villain in the script.

India's opposition parties, once the conscience of the nation, have turned into passive spectators. The media, which once celebrated the truth, now serves as an amplifier for political fiction. A few days ago, another such film was released — titled 'The Red Fort Blast'. The tragedy that unfolded near Delhi's Red Fort Metro Station left eight innocent people dead and dozens injured. The sorrow of those who lost their loved ones is immeasurable, yet their grief was turned into a political screenplay. As facts slowly began to surface, glaring contradictions appeared between what eyewitnesses described and what the government claimed.

Overnight, the story jumped from one end to another as if the script demanded an emotional trigger. No clear proof, no verified trail, only sensational claims. The orchestrated confusion created by shifting names and locations appeared deliberate, serving a single political objective — to stir fear and win votes.

History bears witness that whenever facts contradict the ruling party's narrative, the script is swiftly rewritten. From staged encounters to communal flare-ups, the pattern remains consistent; invent an enemy, inflame emotions, and harvest votes. This manufactured fear serves multiple purposes — it stokes Islamophobia, maligns Kashmiris, distracts the public from real issues, and inevitably points a finger at Pakistan. It is a cycle where tragedy is commodified, truth is suppressed, and humanity is sacrificed at the altar of politics.

India once taught the world that films could heal, unite and inspire. Today, its ruling establishment uses them to divide, deceive and dominate. When art becomes a weapon and politics becomes theatre, the nation loses both its moral compass and its creative soul.

Muhammad Mohsin Iqbal
Islamabad

A negative approach

THE tragic Red Fort incident in India has been extensively analysed and categorised by critics as fitting snugly within the recurring pattern of Indian false flag operations, like the ones that took place in Pahalgam and Pulwama not too long ago. The post-incident narrative kept shifting, which raised many an eyebrow.

It has been consistently argued that when the verifiable facts of a significant incident in India do not conveniently align with the specific political narrative that the government seeks to establish, the official version is often dramatically changed, shifted or fundamentally rewritten. This has been a consistent pattern specifically designed to generate pervasive fear, spread communal hatred, promote divisions, and divert the public's attention from things that are far more important.

The recent blast, in the view of many observers, has unequivocally and demonstrably exposed that the negative approach employed by the Indian establishment remains fundamentally unchanged and fully operational. The consistent absence of transparent, impartial investigation, and the skilful exploitation of powerful nationalist emotions have raised profoundly serious questions about the true underlying motivations behind such catastrophic incidents and the long-term, detrimental consequences they invariably hold for regional peace, institutional accountability, and the pursuit of verifiable truth within the broader regional landscape in South Asia.

The overwhelming and pressing demand now articulated by saner elements is for a rigorous, fair and fully transparent investigation into the tragedy, one that is firmly grounded in verifiable facts and hard evidence rather than being propelled solely by mere speculation, unverified claims, or cynical political motives. Without achieving this necessary level of clarity and truth, such devastating tragedies ultimately risk being remembered not for the attainment of justice for the victims, but for the perceived manipulation of both public grief and widespread fear.

Abdul Basit Alvi
Muzaffarabad

South Asian realities

THE recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bhutan came at a delicate moment for South Asia, which is a region navigating economic pressures, domestic political transitions, and the strategic uncertainty brought by wildly shifting major-power relations. The trip carried broader implications for how New Delhi seeks to engage the region and what kind of stability it hopes to cultivate. In many respects, the visit signalled continuity rather than change on the part of the Indian government.

India and Bhutan have nurtured one of South Asia's most resilient and least contentious bilateral relationships. The partnership is defined by shared cultural ties, geographic interdependence, and decades of development cooperation. Modi's visit, therefore, was, in fact, a reaffirmation of strategy rather than a recalibration.

South Asia today is more fluid and fragmented than in previous decades. Sri Lanka is recovering from economic crisis. Nepal is experiencing a political turnover. The Maldives is adjusting to new strategic realities. Bangladesh is facing domestic and external pressures. As for Pakistan, it remains economically and politically fragile. In such a landscape, Modi's visit to Bhutan sent a critical message that emphasised stability and predictability.

The larger Himalayan region remains sensitive for India, Bhutan and China alike. Bhutan's ongoing boundary discussions with China have been closely observed across the region, not only for their implications on vital territorial questions, but also for what they signify about evolving trends in regional diplomacy. Bhutan aims at having a peaceful resolution of its boundary issues, and seeks to handle both India and China with due sensitivity and independence. The Indian prime minister's visit, in this sense, affirmed India's willingness to maintain open communication and mutual respect regarding Bhutan's sovereign choices. The visit implicitly accepted that South Asia today is not a region of exclusive alignments, but of a variety of bilateral partnerships that also happen to be sometime overlapping.

Ibrahim Khalil Ahasan
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Capital's security

SINCE the 2022 terrorist attack in the federal capital's I-10 sector, Islamabad had remained largely peaceful and secure. Known for its calm environment and organised structure, Islamabad has often been considered one of the safest capitals anywhere in the world — frequently compared with cities such as London, Paris and New York. However, the terrorist attack at the Islamabad Judicial Complex has shaken that confidence and exposed significant flaws in the overall security apparatus.

The incident occurred in one of the most sensitive areas of Islamabad. An attack at such a central and secure location highlights a grave security lapse. Initial CCTV footage and media reports suggest that the assailant spent a considerable time on a busy road between the Judicial Complex and Srinagar Highway before carrying out the attack. This alone raises a lot of troubling questions that call for a thorough investigation and due accountability.

The incident also underscores the absence of a proactive security strategy. Despite a steady increase in the defence budget each year, the failure to safeguard the capital city exposes serious weaknesses in terms of law-enforcement and intelligence coordination. Those leaders and officials responsible must acknowledge this openly, and take corrective measures to ensure that such incidents do not recur.

Ensuring the security of the nation's capital must be treated as an absolute priority, not an afterthought. The state must adopt a firm and comprehensive approach to eliminate terrorism in all its forms and ensure the protection of citizens.

Regrettably, our national response to such tragedies often fades with time. For a few days, the nation grieves, condemns and actively discusses the horrors of terrorism, but soon, memories fade and complacency returns. We must not allow this tragedy to be forgotten. Instead, it should serve as a reminder that the defence of our homeland begins with vigilance, accountability and unity against all forces of terror.

Khateeb Khan
Kotli, AJK

▶ **HEALTHY FOOD:** The absence of healthy food in our urban centres has become a matter of serious concern. Be it schools, offices, or public spaces, fast food and processed food rule the roost, leaving very few healthy options for individuals who are keen to eat healthy stuff. Fresh fruits, vegetables and healthy meals are difficult to access, or are beyond the reach of a common consumer. This leads to terrifying health problems, like obesity, diabetes and heart diseases. The authorities concerned must promote healthy food options and regulate their availability. Public campaigns, subsidised healthy meals at workplaces and schools, and stringent checks on the sale of junk food can help solve this problem.
Fiza Hanif
Karachi

▶ **E-PARKING IN KARACHI:** The government in Sindh has recently introduced an e-challan system in Karachi, which, according to reports, has improved traffic management and discipline on the roads. The government should also consider converting manual parking systems into e-parking. Karachi has become an overcrowded city with a severe shortage of parking plazas. The so-called parking mafia often controls parking areas and charge illegal fee. Frequent disputes occur between the parking mafia and vehicle-owners. The government should actively consider introducing an e-parking system alongside the e-challan initiative to eliminate parking-related corruption.
Musadiq Manzoor
Karachi

▶ **WATER SHORTAGE:** For the last several weeks, the people of Rawalpindi are facing difficulty in getting clean water even for daily basic needs. Taps remain dry for long hours, and people are forced to purchase water from private tankers at high prices. The situation is causing stress to households without any discrimination. The Water and Sanitation Agency (Wasa) and related departments need to improve water supply, repair damaged pipelines, and ensure fair distribution. Water is a basic necessity and the government must take the issue seriously.
Faiza Qaiser
Rawalpindi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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